

Parashat Chukat: Make Yourself a Copper Snake

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Dear Friends,

I am not sure when it happened, but sometime in my youth I stopped complaining! I don't remember making a conscious decision, nor do I remember a momentous event that shaped it, but I went from being a child of average complaints (“I'm hot, I'm bored, I'm hungry...”) to a person who saw complaining as something distasteful and even repugnant.

But in the past few years my complaining has returned. I don't complain as much as I used to, but too much for my own liking. More about that later.

Parashat Chukat is full of complaints. If there is something that characterizes the Israelite journey in the wilderness, it is complaining and griping.

In this parasha we jump ahead to the fortieth and final year of the wilderness journey. Bnei Yisrael have been transformed during this time from a frightened and persecuted group to a nation of daring warriors. They are poised at the eastern side of the Promised Land, making their way northwards towards the Dead Sea and Jericho. Every time they seek to peacefully cross the land of another nation they are refused. This is why they have resorted to the use of might.

Also in this parasha, Miriam the prophetess dies in the fullness of years, as does Aharon, the high priest. Before departing from this world, he and Moshe strike the rock - successfully drawing forth water - but disobeying God's instructions to speak to it. The result of this action is that they are both told they will not enter the Promised Land.

Moshe thought that the generation born in the wilderness would not complain the way the previous generation had, but he discovered he was wrong on that score too. Along with the battles they wage, they do not cease complaining – mostly about the lack of water and their repulsion from the wondrous manna that has nourished them for forty years.

Moshe becomes very angry. He scolds the people fiercely and it is in his anger and frustration, that he strikes the rock instead of speaking to it as instructed. God, too, has had enough of the people's

complaints about the manna, and He sends a plague of poisonous snakes.

It is quite a combination - the complaints and gripes on the one hand, and the frustration and anger on the other. It is very wearing to hear unproductive criticism. Complaints weaken both the speaker and the listener. Where do they come from, these complaints? What is their source?

I think they stem from a deep sense of inner helplessness. Most of us love challenge, and when life poses challenges which are within our reach, we are happy to stretch ourselves and meet them. In such a case, life is like a much-admired basketball coach who knows how to get the most out of each player. But when the challenges we face appear to be beyond our power to overcome, achieve, change, or solve, reality becomes a cruel and bitter enemy. One possible response is to complain. Sometimes it's the only thing we feel is left for us to do.

Helplessness is also the source of the fury and frustration that Moshe feels when faced with the people's grievances. More than once he has turned to God and said: "Did I birth this nation? Did I ask to carry its burden on my shoulders?"

When our children or other people in our lives who are dependent on us complain or express dissatisfaction, we may also feel helpless to solve their problems, and we may react with great anger. This anger does not stem from their needs, but from our helplessness in the face of their distress.

At the beginning of this drasha I wrote that I, too, am complaining more than I have in years. This began when Yehonatan, our son, burst into our lives, restoring a sense of helplessness I hadn't experienced since childhood. Like all children, Yehonatan wants something all the time: He's bored, hot, hungry, thirsty, wants this or that toy, and has all kinds of immediate needs of childhood that can never be entirely satisfied. I, for my part, have a hard time with these needs, because I don't like to refuse him, even if I do so educationally and sympathetically. To be constantly faced with his disappointment and with his unquenchable will is hard, and this hardship breeds my complaints - why can't I control this (cute) little creature? - and anger because I feel so helpless.

Helplessness is a difficult emotion to bear. Sometimes it seems to me that the Torah is one continuous tale of humans facing a reality which is forced upon them, rendering them (and us) helpless. Cain does not understand why his offering is rejected; Avraham does not understand

why he is childless; Eisav discovers his brother has stolen his blessing, even though he has gone hunting as he was asked to do; Rachel demands a child from Yaakov; Yaakov answers his beloved wife in anger: am I God? Yoseph's brothers don't understand why he is their father's favorite, or the meaning of his demeaning dreams; Yaakov, who is told his beloved son has been devoured, cannot overcome his grief, etc.

Notice how none of these characters ever receive an answer. Even in situations in which God speaks to them, He does not provide comfort or consolation in the face of their helplessness. In all of these well-known stories no Divine consolation is offered. None!

It seems that helplessness is an existential reality. It is what we all experience at one time or another in this world to which we were forced into: **"... because against your will you were created, and against your will you were born, and against your will you live, and against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give account and reckoning before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."** (Pirkei Avot 4:22)

If this is the case, what does the Torah suggest we do?

Oh, that it were that simple! Oh, that there was a miraculous remedy for this existential predicament! I have not found one. But there is one possible answer hinted at in our parasha: **"And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food.' The LORD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover."** (Bamidbar 21: 5-8)

The snakes are punishment for the people's complaints, but they are also their cure. The command is to mount a seraph – a snakelike, angelic image made of copper – and raise it like a flag. Anyone who gazes at it will be healed of the poisonous snake bites.

Our Sages ask a famous question (Masechet Rosh Hashana 3: 8): "Is this a snake that kills or that gives life?"(i.e. "How can it do both?") They answer their own question saying: "When Israel looked up and

enslaved their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed. If they didn't, they would fade away."

In my humble opinion, this is a key to withstanding complaints and grievances. I admit it is somewhat simplistic, but it works:

When a person looks "down" all the time and concentrates on his fate, her limited reality with its problems and worries, then the deadly venom flows in our veins. But we can also decide with determination to look up to a higher vision, to a loftier option. (נחישות means determination, which shares the same root with the word for snake, נחש.) With this perspective, that very same reality, those same problems and limitations can suddenly appear to be a tremendous opportunity for growth.

It is very hot today, and as I sit in the air-conditioned comfort at Veahavta (you, too are welcome – it will be on throughout the Shabbat), it is easy to be optimistic, to look up. It is much harder to do so when reality hits hard and, painfully, offering no escape. And yet, looking up will always change one's perspective for the better.

Every challenge can deaden or enliven. The difference is our point of view. Every moment and every opportunity offers us at least two paths to choose from. One path leads to despair, the other to growth. I know that this choice can be very, very difficult. There are moments when it is next to impossible to look up. We are not created equal – there are those whose grass is most definitely greener! There are people to whom life has been less generous. No one can judge another person. This is an entirely personal reckoning.

The summer heat is challenging, and many other obstacles await us. Let us adopt a philosophy of life which is like a copper seraph that gives strength and life, because we will need it sooner or later.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha